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ABSTRACT

Reviewing the historical development of media agenda-setting theory suggests that topics emphasized by the mass news media become the topics people think are most important. The vast majority of agenda-setting studies, however, rely on aggregate measures of media and public agendas, and produce very little support for the original theory as there is no adequate theoretical framework. Furthermore, although recent developments in North American and British research have moved agenda-setting theory away from a functionalist and effects perspective, the theory and methods can still be criticized. Future agenda-setting research should focus on researchers' versus various publics' definitions of media and public agendas, as well as the nature of the communication process and public opinion. (Thirty-four references are included.) (PRA)

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MEDIA AGENDA-SETTING THEORY: POINTS OF DEPARTURE

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MEDIA AGENDA-SETTING THEORY: POINTS OF DEPARTURE

ABSTRACT

The historical development of media agenda-setting theory, primarily researched in North America, is reviewed briefly. Simply stated, agenda-setting proposes that topics emphasised by the mass news media become the topics people think most important.

The term "agenda-setting" is used frequently in the popular press and the theory still enjoys credibility in communication journals, despite serious criticisms. The debate over the value of the agenda-setting theory is examined and theoretical and methodological concerns are related to early writings on mass society and public opinion, and critical theory perspectives. Recent developments in North America and British research, which have moved agenda-setting theory away from a functionalist and effects perspective, are also examined in light of the criticisms concerning theory and method.

The paper proposes new directions for agenda-setting research by focussing on researchers' versus various publics' definitions of media and public agendas, and the nature of the communication process and public opinion.

MEDIA AGENDA SETTING THEORY: POINTS OF DEPARTURE

> "But the real news (as often happens) has been a process, not a series of events, and it has gone largely unreported. I refer to the emergence of a small but influential group of communications overlords who, partly due to the technology of mass media and partly due to a changed Australia, set the public agenda and have become as critical an element - some would say the critical element - in our society as much as government, business, the trade unions and the bureaucracy."
>
> (Sam Lipski, The Bulletin, November 22, 1988: 110)

INTRODUCTION

The popular idea that a small but influential group of journalists and editors set the limits of public debate by telling us what's important and what to talk about has been around for a long time. Media agenda-setting theory, which is based on this idea, almost seems self evident.

As a metaphor for describing media influence, agenda-setting theory was greeted in the 1970s with great optimism (McCombs, 1981). The theory directed researchers to map the correspondence between issues emphasised by the media (through prominence and display) and those issues salient among the public. With its emphasis on long-term cognitive or learning effects of the media rather than persuasive effects, agenda-setting research stood in stark contrast to the three decades of adherence to the minimal media effects position proposed by Klapper (1960).

Agenda-setting research, despite mixed findings and considerable controversy, has been "heuristically provocative" (Chaffee and Berger, 1987: 105) with many studies, mostly on election campaigns, organised around the concept. What do people learn from the media? And, what are the long-term implications of this process?

The McCombs and Shaw (1972) seminal agenda-setting study, which examined the 1968 American presidential campaign, involved rank ordering researcher-identified issues in terms of the amount of prominence given to them by news magazines and comparing these to data from public opinion polls asking respondents what were the most important issues facing the country. This data were also ranked in terms of issue importance. Moderately high correlations were reported between the media rankings of issues and the public rankings of issues. Given the static, cross-sectional design and the chosen sample of undecided voters, the evidence presented was tentative.

The research followed the well-established effects approach. Content analyses of the media were compared to public opinion data collected by survey research methods. In this case, the public agenda was the dependent variable rather than measures of attitude change, the principal dependent variable of previous decades of effects research.

In the period that followed, numerous replications of the McCombs and Shaw study appeared. Most followed the original strategy of using cross-sectional survey designs to describe public opinion in terms of a set of salient issues (what was termed the public agenda) and content analyses to describe the media coverage of these issues (what was termed the media agenda). Only a few studies extended the strategy to descriptions of the public and media agendas across time through the use of panel survey designs (Tipton, Haney and Baseheart, 1975; Shaw and McCombs, 1977) in an attempt to provide support for the causal nature of the hypothesis.

By the media 1980s, however, agenda-setting was viewed, at best, as a limited model describing the social impact of media, or, at worst, something to be regarded with suspicion (Becker, 1982). There was mixed evidence for the hypothesis that the media sets the public agenda. Agenda-setting was not about monolithic media influence but was seen as a model of limited effects which occurred over time. Attention was focused on elaborating the idea that for some people, under some conditions, and for differing media and differing issues, agenda-setting effects varied. This search for contingent conditions - factors that would enhance or diminish agenda-setting effects - led to a variety of studies, each with its own conception of media and public agendas.

In response to this literature, Sless (1986a) argued that, as an approach to understanding media influence, agenda-setting echoed Klapper's (1960) earlier summary of attitudinal effects research. The mass media were limited in agenda-setting effects and other contingent conditions intervened.

Nevertheless, identifying and examining contingent conditions is still seen as a useful strategy in dealing with increasing criticism of the original hypothesis, and in testing the robustness of the media-to-public relationship.

Of principal interest in the search for contingent conditions was the emergence of different ways of conceptualising media agenda-setting influence. Rather than examining sets of media generated issues and aggregate public responses to these issues, research began to look at single issues and how they rose and fell on the media and public agendas over time. A brief review of this research leads to one of several points of departure.

Apart from the obvious contingencies such as varying degrees of media exposure and differences between print and broadcast media, research has identified two important variables in elaborating the initial agenda-setting concept. The first is the concept need for orientation, which attempts to measure peoples' uncertainty about an election campaign outcome and their interest in the campaign. Those with high interest and high uncertainty are said to be more susceptible to agenda-setting influence. This contingency, which has been most used in aggregate data studies, led the way for the suggestion that agenda-setting could be usefully merged with that contentious approach, media uses and gratifications (McCombs and Weaver, 1985).

The second identified contingency concerns the nature of issues or, more correctly, peoples' perception of issue salience and has directed research toward single issue analyses.

The beginning of this line of inquiry is usually credited to Zucker (1978) who reasoned that the less direct experience people have with an issue, the more they would rely on the media for information and interpretation of that issue. Issues with which people had direct personal experience were called obtrusive, while those issues with which people had little direct personal experience were called unobtrusive. This distinction is based on the presumed amount of direct contact the audience has with an issue, independent of media exposure. Examining single issues across time, Zucker demonstrated the influence of television news in increasing the salience of the less personal or unobtrusive issues.

Zucker's approach reflects, in part, the early writings on public opinion by the British scholar Graham Wallas (1914) and his American student Walter Lippmann (1922). Both sought to document the dynamics of the relationship between the world out there beyond the reach of our senses and the world view that reaches us through newspapers.

Following Zucker, Eyal (1980) found media agenda-setting effects for a set of issues he labelled unobtrusive but not for the obtrusive set of issues. Similarly, Iyengar (1979) found no agenda-setting influence for a set of issues and concluded that the salience of the issues under examination may simply be a function of the number of people they effect, regardless of media influence. Agenda-setting, he said, may be limited to remote or peripheral issues which are beyond the reach of personal experience.

In an elaborate single issue analysis, Erbring et. al (1980: 46) argued that "people have different notions of what is important to them, and they tune in and out accordingly. Exposure to media content is a necessary but not sufficient condition".

In a similar approach, Blood (1981) observed that the obtrusive/unobtrusive distinction was misnamed and misdirected. Researcher designations of what an issue means to any public are meaningless. It is not the issue per se

that is obtrusive or unobtrusive. Rather, it is the individual's experience with the issue that makes it obtrusive or unobtrusive.

This avenue of research opened up new ways of conceptualising media agenda-setting influence. The definition of influence or effect moved from examining aggregate issues and aggregate public opinion data toward single issue analysis across time. The latter studies, in particular, assume that examining aggregate media or public agendas is of little value. But this research points also to more fundamental concerns which moves media agenda-setting beyond what might be called the traditional approach.

CRITIQUE OF THE TRADITIONAL APPROACH

The vast majority of agenda-setting studies conducted within the mainstream Anglo-American empirical approach rely on aggregate measures of media and public agendas. This research does not produce very convincing support for the original hypothesis. The variation in media agenda-setting effects may simply be a result of differences in how people assess the importance of issues regardless of media content. The original hypothesis was cast in terms of individual level media influence yet the test of that hypothesis is at the aggregate level of analysis (Becker, 1982).

If the search for contingent conditions shows anything it is the failure of the traditional aggregate approach. As Erbring et. al (1980: 18) conclude:

> "The focus on the agenda as an overall pattern of gestalt ignores the obvious fact that issue concerns can and do arise from sources other than media exposure - notably from personal experiences, group perspectives and real-world conditions - and that these factors will vary not only across individuals, but also among issues and over time. Differential media treatment is but one factor among many that determines the salience of issues. To compare the distribution of media coverage and audience salience across issues, is therefore, pointless."

Viewed another way, the move to single issue analysis is recognition of the fact that the aggregate media agenda (a ranking of a set of researcher-identified issues) is most probably an artifact of the method used. Such a position is in partial agreement with Sless (1986a: 33) who states:

> "I don't think there are any valid methods for determining media agenda and I would go further and say that any so-called media agenda is an artifact of media analysis. The media per se do not have any agenda. It is the readers of the media who bring such agenda into existence."

The single issue analyses by Erbring et. al (1980), and Blood (1981), follow a similar logic to Sless' second proposition. (See also: Sless, 1986b). In contrast, most aggregate data agenda-setting studies rely on a simple content analysis of a selection of media content. Usually, however,

researchers examine public opinion data (the findings of survey research) and work backwards to then examine the media content. Such an approach is a backwards logic in terms of the original hypothesis. At least, single issue analysis attempts to tap an individual's assessment of the importance of the issue across time and, in most cases, the relative prominence given to the issue in a selection of media content.

Nevertheless, the term "issue" raises some familiar but critical arguments. Drawing on the work of Edelstein (1976), Becker (1982) quite correctly points to the obvious (but usually ignored) fact that "issue" might well mean something quite different to a researcher than what it might mean to an individual. And, how the media define "issue" might mean something altogether different again.

Furthermore, agenda-setting research has not come to terms with that growing body of research concerning the audiences' experience with television news. While it is argued (McCombs 1981) that newspaper are better agenda-setters than television, there is considerable evidence suggesting strongly that people forget much, and certainly misinterpret most, of what they hear and see on television news (See: Gunter's 1983 summary).

As a consequence, the majority of research to date is based on what may be an artifact, that is, the researcher-identified media agenda which may have little meaning or value. Most of the research views media influence in a linear, uni-directional perspective. The limitations of content analysis and survey research designs are rarely addressed. In line with traditional effects studies, the focus is on the media-to-audience relationship with the media content not regarded as problematic.

The way people assign importance to an issue is relatively unexplored. At least three criteria could be important. People may classify issues solely in terms of how it affects them, or they may perceive issues as important in terms of how they believe it will affect significant others (McCombs, 1981). People may also perceive an issue to be important in terms of how often they talk about it with others. Although the agenda-setting research literature often makes these (and similar) distinctions most of the evidence is presented at the aggregate level. The public's experience with television news is not systematically researched.

As a program of study, agenda-setting research often fails to satisfy the usual requirements of reliability and validity, particularly given the methods of content analysis and collection of public opinion data using survey research methods. McCombs (1981) has repeatedly urged researchers to complete these types of evaluation. Further, Becker (1982) observes that most research is directed toward assessing construct validity - a very difficult process in a new research area. Pragmatic or criterion validity

assessments of agenda-setting, which should be the primary concerns, are made difficult because of poor definitions of fundamental concepts (media agenda, issue salience, etc.), and confusion about what the "effect" actually is - especially in terms of how individuals may attach importance to an issue.

In this regard, the recent research, using experimental design and secondary survey analyses, by Iyengar and Kinder (1987) on the priming effect of lead stories in television news bulletins also offers the opportunity to extend media agenda-setting beyond cognitive effects to incorporate information processing perspectives.

The original agenda-setting hypothesis came under the banner of a media function. Recall that the McCombs and Shaw (1972) study was titled, "The Agenda-Setting Function of the Mass Media". But nowhere in the research literature is there to be found an adequate description of what is meant by agenda-setting function. In summaries of the literature (see, for example, McQuail and Windahl, 1981): 62) the word function is often dropped. In McCombs' (1981) major review, there is no discussion that connects agenda-setting to functionalism. Nor is there anything inherent in the methods used that tie agenda-setting analyses to functional theory.

All of this underscores agenda-setting's most serious criticism - its lack of an adequate theoretical framework. As most agenda-setting researchers would agree, there is no grand agenda-setting theory, at least not in the way that most would regard the term theory (cf: Chaffee and Berger, 1987: 105). Agenda-setting is a variable analytic approach consistent with much effects research. Within the boundaries of the approach, the primary response has been an attempt to link agenda-setting to a wider model of media effects (Becker, 1982) and to search for new contingent conditions that elaborated the media-to-public agenda relationship (McCombs, 1981).

McCombs (1981) argues that the delineation of contingent conditions for media agenda-setting is a major step toward building a theory. Underpinning this approach and the move away from aggregate tests of the hypothesis, is notion of a transactional model.

This transactional perspective, which has its roots in the work of Bauer (1960) and Kraus and Davis (1978: 142), proposes that media influence results from both the content of the mass media and from the social situation in which that content is scanned by each individual in the audience.

But in the elaboration of this model, McCombs (1981), Blood (1981) and McCombs and Weaver (1985) take an individual differences approach on one hand and appear to connect agenda-setting to a uses and gratifications

approach on the other. What needs, stemming from their social situation does the audience have, and how do they impact on the media's ability to affect issue salience. As McCombs says, rather than making a simple "effects" prediction that the priorities of the media will become the priorities of the public, this transactional model assumes individual differences both in this scanning behaviour and the degree of the attunement to the priorities of the mass media agenda.

Such a view is hardly a theory, for it really only links two variable analytic approaches. A transactional view might have more meaning and applicability to agenda-setting research if it incorporated the notion of peoples' varying degrees of dependency on mass media and expanded the idea of scanning behaviour to include how people experience and interpret meanings in news content.

Elsewhere, there have been vague references to the idea of agenda-setting as being a social anchoring mechanism, although these ideas have not been elaborated. This view takes agenda-setting closer to traditional functional analysis. For example, Chaffee (in McCombs,. 1981: 136) comments that as a general functional requirement of society, agenda-setting is practically indispensable. He argues we should evaluate the news media in terms of fulfilling that kind of function, and not fall into the old persuasional trap of looking for media influences and directional effects. Chaffee argues that the societal function of the press is not to direct and channel people's behaviours and perceptions in specific ways, but to help us organise our activities and knowledge so that we can work in a coherent way on problems that are common to many people, communities, etc.

This discussion is a long way from Lippmann and Wallas who tried to come to terms with the power of the mass media as definers of social reality, and to link these ideas to centres of power in modern society.

Certainly, Sless' (1986a) observation that American agenda-setting research follows the position of Klapper (1960) is a useful departure.

If one does believe the results of the aggregate data analysis produced to support agenda-setting (or, better, relies more on the refined, single issue analytic studies) there is no doubt that agenda-setting is a limited theoretical model of media effects. Essentially, it lacks explicit references to power in society that may constrain or influence how we interpret media impact. And, at times, it has a consumerist view of the public. There is nothing wrong with a limited view - but it could be more. Agenda-setting research carries with it the conceptual baggage of the effects tradition, even in the transition from direct short-term media effects on attitudes toward longer-term cognitive media effects. In summary, much of the researching is bounded by its method.

Critical theorists seem to be bounded in another way. In a paradigm where ideology and meaning are the focus, media agenda-setting appears to play an assumed powerful role. For example, Bell et al (1980) in their study of the 1980 Australian federal election constantly refer to television's role in creating a public agenda. True to the paradigm there is no evaluation of public response. The assumed power of media agenda-setting rests solely on an examination of media texts. This power ascribed to the media is seen from the researcher's position not the publics. No differentiation of influence is offered.

Barrat (1986: 51) is explicit in his definition of agenda-setting; "the ideological role of the mass media". Agenda-setting, he says, is the process whereby the terms of reference for debate are fixed to suit the interests of the powerful.

Drawing on work by the Glasgow Media Group, Barrat attempts to persuade us that the media agenda sets up a discourse within certain messages are permissible. This research is not arguing that news reflects back on society by reinforcing attitudes about specific occurrences, which was the dominant research direction of earlier American research. Rather, the general idea is that news creates a "consistent frame" or an internally coherent reality. News encourages the viewer to see everyday life in terms of this internally created consistency.

That may very well be the case, but the position involves a giant leap in logic. Reading texts (in this case, television news) does not tell us anything about the publics' experience with watching, misunderstanding, misinterpreting or ignoring the news.

Anglo-American empirical elaborations of agenda-setting are, of course, partly in competition to this view of mass news media serving the ideological mainstream and, therefore, subservient to the primary definers of politics. From this perspective, the original McCombs (1972) agenda-setting concept ignores crucial relationships between the media and society's centres of political and social power.

POINTS OF DEPARTURE

As is evident from Barrat's summary, one of the boundaries of the mainstream agenda-setting approach has been the research on news organisations, primarily examinations of how news is processed. This boundary has been recognised by Becker (1982), McCombs (1981) and, more usefully, by Gurevitch and his colleagues (1986) in asking the question:, who sets the media agenda?

In an innovative research program, Gurevitch et al (1986), have moved agenda-setting research away from the focus on the supposed media-to-audience relationship. This research, which should more properly be labelled agenda-framing (after Bybee, 1983), has two principal points of departure.

First, the research differs from what Gurevitch et al term the "classical" McCombs tradition and examines the relative contributions of the news media, political candidates and parties in the shaping of campaign agenda as they evolve during an election. Such an approach is an elaboration Gandy's (1982) work which studied how American corporations and organisations tried to manipulate mass news media.

Secondly, the research is conducted within an international comparative framework. Gurevitch et al (1986: 3) argue that the news media's role in forming election campaign agendas is shaped by the political cultures and structures in the society. The media's role is bounded by "parameters through which a given political culture defines the 'permissible' interventionary function of the media, as well as the constraints which a political structure imposes on the performance of such function".

Rather than examining the media-to-public agenda relationships, the research relies upon participant observation, and small-group interviewing, of journalists and editors. These observations are organised into four broad factors: the position of politics and of politicians in society (and by my extension, the debate over what is political), journalists' orientation toward politics and politicians, the degree of packaging and management of the campaign by appointed "media experts", and variation of media competition. By this process, the research aims to understand the discretionary power of the media to play a more or less interventionary role in the structuring of election campaign agendas.

Similar approaches can be found in research coming from European and Critical theoretical perspectives. These departures in agenda-setting (or agenda-framing) research have long been seen by Blumler and Gurevitch (1982: 262) as points of convergence between European and Anglo-American scholars. The creation of the media agenda is partly a product of routine journalistic practice in a given society:

> "It is consequently at least partially hidden from the audience and may be even hidden from professionals involved in news production themselves ... Read in this manner, agenda-setting research appears to converge toward the Marxist view that the ideological role of the mass media has structural roots embedded in routines and practices of media production, which in turn may reflect interpretative frameworks dominant in society at a given time."

THE RESEARCHER'S POSITION:

There are two confounding logics of researcher's position at work in these two approaches to agenda-setting, following Sless (1987). The macro approach places the researcher with the editors, journalists and other sources of control or constraint over the news product. Research projects onto the audience. In contrast, in the "classical" or traditional media-to-audience approach, the researcher is placed primarily with the public agenda, which is most cases is a construction of that researcher. Research projects onto the media. These confounding logics have, at least, this consequence.

There is nothing in either program of research (traditional or comparative macro-analysis) that links them together. Underlying the approach by Gurevitch et al (1986) in rescuing agenda-setting research from the "effects" tradition and relocating it within an examination of media-political institutional relationships is this question: if the media set the agenda, who sets the media agenda? (p. 3). That is, this research has most value if we assume that the media sets the public agenda. But based on the above, the media-to-audience relationship is, at best, problematic. That consequence does not detract from the immense value to be gained in the macro-analytic approach - a point demonstrated clearly by Blumler and McLeod (1987).

IMPLICATIONS:

First, evidence for media agenda-setting influence based on aggregate public opinion data and a researcher-identified media agenda is of little value and does not test the original hypothesis. Given that most of the research is of this type, this leaves traditional, aggregate data agenda-setting research at a dead end. Secondly, single issue analyses - where the rise and fall of either personal importance attached to an issue, or a perceived community interest of the importance of an issue - are better ways of examining media agenda-setting. However, very little work has been done in establishing the validity of these designs. These studies should move away from a single perspective of media agenda-setting toward considering at least the different values varying publics attach to issues, and what those issues mean to them.

Such investigations mean that reliance on single, self-report measures in the usual large scale survey designs is an insufficient indicator of public opinion. Both qualitative and quantitative data are required.

How do agenda-setting researchers define public opinion? Or in this context, why does the research accept the notion that survey research alone is a valid method by which to elaborate public opinions about issues? Has

the salience of researcher-identified issues become a self-evident reality? Or, to use Vatz's (1976) argument, might it not be the case that "what we conceptualise as 'public opinion' turns out to be only the measurement of public opinion".

Further, following Tuchman (1981), rather than asking how news about an electoral campaign influences a public agenda (or why people watch television news), we can begin to ask about the perceptions and social meanings attached to "talking" to the news when it enters our homes. Again, experimental evidence (Iyengar and Kinder, 1988) of "priming" by lead stories in creating a frame of reference for interpretation appears to be a highly fruitful avenue of research.

Only then can the research begin to explore the question Sless (1986) posed in his research agenda. How appropriate is the agenda-setting metaphor to our relations with the media, in what way is living in our kind of society like participating in a grand debate, and how far does the public accept the constitutional right of the media to control the debate.

Related to these questions is the idea of media dependency, which may provide a loose, beginning theoretical framework for these investigations. After Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976), research should examine the extent to which various publics depend on mass media information and entertainment sources for their knowledge of, and orientation to, what is happening in their society. The acknowledged weakness of this approach is the overstatement of the independence of the mass news media from global and structural social system variables. Despite, frequent references to this approach, very little has been to elaborate these ideas within a media agenda-setting framework at either a micro or at the macro level, where the ideas were originally expressed.

On one level, this research would involve study of the peoples' varying degrees of dependence on the media for guiding frameworks perceived as issue agendas and, at another level, the perceived dependence of politicians, parties, etc. on media institutions for access to public. These questions can be posed at both a macro (and international comparative level) and at a micro effects level.

This latter work - what is called here agenda-framing or factors that may lead to the shaping of media agendas - should be kept separate from agenda-setting research until more evidence is presented concerning the validity of media agenda setting influence from the standpoints of differing publics.

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